

THE MINISTRY OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES of Catholic Education have been settled long ago. Jesus established his Church to be ‘Mother and Teacher’ (*Mater et Magistra*). He commanded it to ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’ (Mth 28:19). The ministry of Catholic Education is one form of that teaching.

Catholic Education has been provided in a variety of ways down the centuries—as catechesis in the early centuries, as higher learning in the medieval Schools and Universities, as schooling at all levels from the time of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment.

Catholic Education has undergone its own self-corrections along the way. For instance, in the latter part of the twentieth century the R.E. component of Catholic Education was renewed to transcend the narrowly apologetical style it had adopted in reaction to rationalism.

Of recent years official and semi-official documents, such as the ‘Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishops’ Conferences on Religious Education in Schools’ from the Congregation for Catholic Education, May 5th 2009, have been doing little more than express and describe a policy that is generally accepted in practice.

Pope Benedict has spoken a number of times on the subject. As always he is clear and to the point, concentrating on what is essential and on the contemporary challenges. He says what a theologian can be expected to say, which is understandable, given that Pope Benedict himself is one and the same person as Joseph Ratzinger, one of the most respected theologians of our time. But in so doing he invites us to ponder the subject at depth.

Catholic education, he affirms, is integral to the mission of the Church. It is more than communicating knowledge about the world, it is education in the faith, enabling students to come to know God, to meet Jesus and to enter into a personal relationship with him.

Students are to come to know that they are loved by God.

The teacher is called, then, to do more than impart information and develop skills. The teacher is to tell the Good News to the students, to convey to them the truth that God and God alone—not money, career, worldly success—can satisfy the deepest longings and needs of our hearts. The teacher’s role is to impart wisdom, true wisdom that includes knowing the Creator and looking for happiness in the right places. In doing so, teachers will guide their students to live life to the full.

A happy student is never a selfish student, concerned only with satisfaction of his/her immediate wishes. Pope Benedict developed this theme in various ways. In language for adults he cautioned:

When nothing beyond the individual is recognized as definitive, the ultimate criterion of judgment becomes the self and the satisfaction of the individual’s immediate wishes. The objectivity and perspective, which can only come through a recognition of the essential transcendent dimension of the human person, can be lost.

Speaking to children, he said:

You begin to see greed and selfishness and all the other sins for what they really are, destructive and dangerous tendencies that cause deep suffering and do great damage, and you want to avoid falling into that trap yourselves. You begin to feel compassion for people in difficulties and you are eager to do something to help them. You want to come to the aid of the poor and the hungry, you want to comfort the sorrowful, you want to be kind and generous.

The consequence for the school from all this is that the life of faith is ‘the driving force behind every activity in the school’.

Particularly striking is the pope’s description of the ministry of Catholic Education as ‘the pastoral care of intelligence’. Those who exercise this ministry do so not only for the

faithful, for believers, but for the whole of society—‘purifying reason, ensuring that it remains open to the consideration of ultimate truths...[the exercise of this ministry] helps to keep public debate rational, honest and accountable...Truth means more than knowledge: knowing the truth leads us to discover the good’. He waxes eloquent on this theme.

Pope Benedict reflected at length on how the Church’s effort to provide Catholic education is a contribution to society.

Historically it has always been a significant contribution. Pope Benedict recalls that often Catholic teachers, especially religious sisters, brothers and priests, were providing education in remote places and among neglected peoples long before the State assumed a responsibility for providing it.

In our time Catholic Education also contributes to society by presenting an alternative in a prevalingly secularist, relativist and materialist climate. The pope declared that Catholic scholarship and education, ‘founded on the unity of truth and in service of the person and the community’ provides a response to moral confusion and fragmentation of knowledge; Catholic Education offers hope to our world.

Corresponding to all this, Pope Benedict encouraged students to pursue worthwhile goals in their own lives and to resist narrow outlooks. Speaking to older students, he said:

As you move higher up the school, you have to make choices regarding the subjects you study, you begin to specialize with a view to what you are going to do later on in life. That is right and proper. But always remember that every subject you study is part of a bigger picture. Never allow yourselves to become narrow. The world needs good scientists, but a scientific outlook becomes dangerously narrow if it ignores the religious or ethical dimension of life, just as religion becomes narrow if it rejects the legiti-

mate contribution of science to our understanding of the world. We need good historians and philosophers and economists, but if the account they give of human life within their particular field is too narrowly focused, they can lead us seriously astray.

Catholic Education is a responsibility for the whole Christian community, while the family has the primary responsibility. Pope Benedict encouraged family participation in catechesis and in the entire process of Christian initiation of children and adolescents, which has produced ‘appreciable results’ and urged that it be adopted in every parish. He acknowledged that some families resist it or are indifferent to it—they do not seem to be interested in the Christian education of their own children; ‘but this is rare’.

The pope reflected on the pastoral care of adolescents, how it is a time of life in which young people strive for autonomy. The challenge then is to enable them to discover true freedom. He reflected on their readiness to be challenged, their need for credible witnesses, their need for authority, their readiness to commit, their call to be witnesses themselves—that is, to take their part in the mission of the Church.

The following passage might sum up Benedict’s main message on the subject of Catholic Education:

By educating in the faith, a very important task is entrusted to Catholic schools. Indeed, they must carry out their mission on the basis of an educational project which places the Gospel at the centre and keeps it as a decisive reference point for the person’s formation and for the entire cultural programme.

As we ponder all this we appreciate still more the contribution that Catholic Education makes in the Church’s response to the mission entrusted to it by Christ.

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See the Vatican website (www.vatican.va): Pope Benedict’s ‘Address to the participants in the Convention of the Diocese of Rome’, 11th June, 2007; his address to Catholic Educators in the United States, 17th April 2008; the Congregation for Catholic Education’s ‘Circular Letter to the Presidents of Bishops’ Conferences on Religious Education in Schools’, May 5th 2009; Pope Benedict’s address in the UK, 17th September, 2010.